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AUTHOR Sharkey, Judy
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ABSTRACT

While most students in a secondary language arts methods course found writing and reading each other's critical literacy autobiographies interesting and helpful to their understanding of literacy, they struggled with how to respond to their classmates' autobiographies. That struggle emerged within a teacher inquiry project whose central question was: What is the role of critical literacy autobiography in the emerging pedagogical beliefs of prospective secondary language arts teachers? At mid-point in the 15-week semester, students submitted revised versions of critical literacy autobiographies (a writing process approach required successive drafts). Students read their peers' drafts and provided written feedback on content and form. General guidelines for responses were provided. At the end of the tenth week, the autobiographies were returned, and students were asked to freewrite a response to comments they had received. These were discussed in small groups before having a large group discussion. For the inquiry project the following data were collected: eleven autobiographies (1800-2400 words each); the responses written on the autobiographies (92 total responses); a transcript of one class discussion; the freewrite responses; notes from the teacher's journal; and transcripts from five student interviews. The autobiographies revealed a range of critical engagement. Students' interviews stated that they enjoyed doing the autobiographies and found them useful. Reading and responding to classmates' autobiographies was challenging, and difficult for some. Class discussions helped students to process the struggle collectively. Appendixes contain sequence of writing assignments and the interview protocol. (Contains 2 tables of data and 38 references.) (NKA)

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by Judy Sharkey

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Responding to critical literacy autobiographies: Disrupting the "working consensus" or perpetuating the myth of homogeneity

Judy Sharkey
Penn State University
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Heather* : ... I think on some individuals' [autobiographies], it seemed that they were masking what they thought. With one in particular,...as I was digging deeper and really thinking about him and the way he is, I was like "wow, this isn't what you really think."

Judy: What kind of comments did you write on his paper?

Heather (reading the comments she wrote): Oh, Heather that was really nice of you. I told him exactly what he wanted to hear (laughs). So, what I was thinking and what I was writing were totally different. Wow. Hmm.

Judy: So, how do you feel about that?

Heather: It kind of makes me angry but I don't know how I would go about that and [say] "Well, the way I see it, you only identify with the White, upper middle class." I don't know how I would confront that (Heather, interview, pp. 5-6).

These comments were made in reference to an assignment that required students in a secondary language arts methods course to read and respond to their classmates' critical literacy autobiographies, texts in which students explored their literacy development, taking into consideration the factors of race, class, and gender. While the majority of the students found writing and reading each other's stories interesting and helpful to their understanding of literacy, they struggled with how to respond to their classmates' autobiographies. For future language arts teachers who will write comments on thousands of student papers, this is a worthwhile struggle and the tension it evoked warrants exploration and analysis for it taps into how certain stories and experiences come to be privileged and legitimated while others are ignored or stigmatized. The purpose of this paper is to explore that struggle as it emerged within a teacher inquiry project whose central question was: What is the role of critical literacy autobiography in the emerging pedagogical beliefs of prospective secondary language arts teachers?

* all student names are pseudonyms

The title intentionally evokes Goffman's (1959) work in symbolic interactionism in which he uses "working consensus" (p. 10) to refer to the tacit agreement members of a group enact when they do not challenge each other's stated opinions. Newkirk (1997) applies Goffman's idea of presentation of self to student writing, suggesting that, for both teachers and students, the formulaic nature of the lesson-learned-from-experience essay can preclude honest reflection. As Heather's comments indicate, responding to writing can also become formulaic. While writing autobiography has become a more popular activity in teacher education, the issue of *responding* to those texts has been left relatively unexplored, yet the responding is a crucial issue as it lays bare which kinds of stories get validated or disregarded.

Sharing and responding to stories is a complex and dynamic process. This qualitative inquiry, framed within critical feminist pedagogy, is a story of stories, the discussion of which is based on textual analysis of the autobiographies, the responses students wrote on each other's autobiographies, notes from my teaching journal, transcripts of classroom discussions, and individual interviews with five students on the nature of the experience. As the title suggests, the focus here is on the issue of responding to others' autobiographies.

Context and participants

In the spring of 1998, I taught a secondary language arts methods course at a public university in central Pennsylvania. The course approached literacy from a sociocultural perspective, exploring the influences of race, class, and gender on literacy and language development and practices. It was one of a three-course block required of students in their first semester in the secondary language and literacy education program. The students in my class spent more than nine hours a week together as classmates. I was a first-year doctoral student in the position of graduate teaching assistant. Before beginning the program in fall 1997, I spent more than eight years teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) in a variety of countries in the Middle East, Asia, Central and South America.

There were eleven students; eight women and four men initially enrolled, but one male student withdrew from the course in the first half of the semester. The students were White, from

a mix of working-, middle, and upper-middle class backgrounds. Four students (three women and one man) mentioned the role of Christianity in their literacy development; one woman mentioned the role of her Jewish culture in her interview but not in her autobiography. Although several students openly discussed issues related to heterosexual dating, no one openly identified him/herself as gay or lesbian. Ten of the students were aged twenty to twenty-four; one woman was a returning student with grandchildren. I am a White woman, in my mid-thirties from a working-class Irish Catholic background.

Critical literacy and critical feminist pedagogy

Stated simply, a critical literacy autobiography asks writers to investigate how issues of race, class, and gender have affected their literacy and language development. "Literacy" extends beyond the traditional definition of print to include a vast range of visual and aural texts from television and the Internet to pop music and video games. Critical literacy seeks to uncover the ideologies embedded in texts and their social and political implications by asking whose interests are served, for what purposes, and whose perspectives are marginalized or excluded (Fairclough, 1989; Giroux, 1991: Shor, 1992). The purpose of such analysis is to work towards creating a more just and equitable democracy. Disrupting the working consensus is indeed central to this pedagogy.

My notion of a critical literacy autobiography is informed by critical feminist pedagogy. Critical pedagogy "attends to the practices of teaching/learning intended to interrupt historical, situated, systems of oppressions" (Lather, 1992, p. 121). According to Freire (1970/1988), those systems of oppression actively shape an individual's consciousness. Subordinate groups may be historically conditioned to devalue themselves and their capacities. A "culture of silence" can result leading to the fatalistic belief that asymmetrical distribution of power is a natural rather than cultural phenomenon (Freire, 1985).

Feminist pedagogy, like critical pedagogy, is concerned with transformative education that leads to social change (Cohee, Däumer, Kemp, Krebs, Lafky and Runzo, 1998; Weiler, 1993). It values the notion of personal experience as a source of knowledge and questions the notion of

teacher as sole authority, that is, sole knower, in the classroom. However, feminism devoid of the self-critique integral to critical pedagogy can easily fall into the essentialist, separatist trap of reproducing the same social conditions it seeks to disrupt (hooks, 1994). Feminism can build on the critical consciousness-raising and socially transformative aspects of critical pedagogy by recognizing the role of personal experience and acknowledging that the dynamics of the classroom play a crucial part in that transformation as they may include multiple layers of oppression that get played out in classroom interactions (Weiler, 1993). Addressing the critical issues that emerge in class dynamics without sacrificing commitment to social action, for fear of rupturing the "comfort zone," is one of the most challenging aspects of critical feminist pedagogy. Critical autobiography embodies the strengths of these two pedagogies in its valuing of lived experiences and its insistence on the interrogation of those experiences. Heather's opening comments speak directly to these tensions.

Autobiography in teacher education

For well over a decade now, the genre of autobiography has been gaining more prominence and acceptance in teacher education. Running parallel and indeed, interacting with this stream of autobiography in teacher education has been a movement to legitimatize narrative ways of knowing, both in how individuals interpret their worlds and how researchers interpret and present their findings (Bruner, 1985; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Witherell and Noddings, 1991).

Autobiography has been used with practicing, veteran women teachers as a way to help them (re)claim their voices and roles in education, especially since women make up the vast majority of teachers (Casey, 1993; Grumet, 1988). It has also been used as a way to value teachers' experiences (Schubert and Ayers, 1992). Recognizing the power of narrative, teacher educators have also used published autobiographies to supplement overtly theoretical texts in order to help prospective teachers understand specific concepts such as accommodation and resistance in schooling (Franzosa, 1992), and to foster empathetic understanding for the experiences and struggles of language minority students (Florio-Ruane, 1994).

A considerable amount of literature has focused on the use of autobiography with practicing teachers and although there have been calls for prospective teachers to write autobiographies as part of their teacher education program (Ayers, 1989; Britzman, 1991; Grumet, 1989; Pailliotet, 1995), research on prospective teachers engaging in this process has been mainly conceptual. Empirical studies are relatively sparse. A preliminary study by Ayers (1989) indicated that prospective teachers enrolled in an one-year experimental teacher education program that included the use of autobiography,

> developed a strong sense of efficacy and an ability to draw on personal as well as social resources.... [were] more able to consider a range of alternatives in the process of developing curriculum,....[were] more willing to resist arbitrary directives from authority, [and]....tend[ed] to look to the children themselves... to interact with them in a variety of ways as a starting point for curriculum deliberation (Ayers, 1989, p. 6).

I believe my project will contribute to the knowledge base in two ways: first, add to the literature on prospective teachers writing autobiography; and second, expand the parameters of autobiography projects to include how individuals respond to one another's stories.

Writing autobiography

"OK, so twenty years ago, everyone was into modernism and now they're into postmodernism. What are we supposed to do in ten years when they come up with something else?" These words, spoken during the first week of the course by the student Patty, offer a glimpse into her nascent understanding of her future role as a teacher. At this moment, early in her teacher education program, she sees herself as a conduit for, rather than a generator of knowledge. She is not unlike many prospective teachers who may view theory as received knowledge. Writing autobiographies might create a space where students are more engaged—both in critically reading theory and articulating their own beliefs about learning and teaching. Furthermore, autobiography encourages the interrogation of memories and images of schooling.

By the time they enter their teacher education program, prospective teachers have already completed 10,000 hours of classroom time. Research suggests that this "apprenticeship of

observation" (Lortie, 1975) means that prospective teachers bring with them such strongly held beliefs about teaching, that coursework and field experience do little, if anything, to challenge those beliefs (Johnson, 1994). The images of their own learning experiences have a tremendous impact on how prospective teachers will teach. Britzman (1991) and Grumet (1988) suggest that autobiographies create opportunities to critique one's deeply held beliefs about teaching.

Responding to autobiographies

The collective and public process was emphasized in this inquiry project because while writing an autobiography can be powerfully enlightening, even liberating to individuals who have never felt their voices acknowledged or valued, void of critical interrogation, it can also be a very solipsistic activity that merely reinforces the limiting nature of purely subjective knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986/1997). For autobiographies to be transformative they must move beyond "the romantic pedagogical mode that exoticizes lived experiences" (Macedo, 1994, p. 175) and be linked to a larger project. In this instance, the project was to investigate how critical notions such as race, class, and gender affect literacy and language development.

Making the private public challenges prospective teachers to acknowledge the importance and diversity of lived experiences in learning and identity formation. Juxtaposing one's story with those of others can lead to powerful insights. For teachers, it is important to appreciate not only different learning styles, but different lived experiences, and different ways of meaning-making. This is true for all teachers but is especially crucial for teachers whose classrooms will change dramatically over the next twenty years due to the changing demographics of the United States. So, while I wanted students to consider their own experiences as part of the research base of literacy theory, I also wanted to challenge the interpretations of those experiences. Realizing that one's experience does not match that of others shouldn't negate its value, but rather it should encourage us to expand our theories and theorizing.

The autobiography project

At the mid-point in the fifteen-week semester, students submitted revised versions of critical literacy autobiographies, seven to eight pages in length. The phrase "final version" was

intentionally avoided in order to convey the idea that an autobiography is never complete, but rather is always a work in progress. Throughout the semester, we had talked about personal experience as a source of knowledge but also a potential impediment to knowledge. Earlier in the semester students had written two short response papers (each three to four pages) on the role of gender in their literacy development and the role of community in their literacy development. The purpose of these papers was for the students to connect their own experiences to the course readings as a way of extending, challenging, and personalizing the discussions of those readings. For example, in conjunction with reading Heath (1983/1997), students compared their home literacy practices to those endorsed by the schools they attended. Students were encouraged to use those papers to help them write the autobiography. (See appendix A for sequence of writing assignments.) When several students asked for further clarification of the assignment, I made available to those interested copies of a literacy memoir I had written (as an assignment) for a class the previous semester.

For the autobiographies, as with the earlier response papers, we used a writing process approach. For the first draft, students worked in groups with two or three classmates. The drafts were read aloud with peers responding only to content, asking clarification questions and giving suggestions for future directions. Second drafts were due a week later. Once again, each student worked with two or three classmates, though not necessarily the same people they had worked with previously. Students read their peers' drafts and provided written feedback on both content and form. The revised autobiographies were due one week later.

On the day the assignment was due, students brought two copies of their autobiographies to class. Several pieces of blank paper for comments were attached to the end of each autobiography. The autobiographies were placed in piles around the room; each of us took one, read it, wrote comments (signed our names), placed it back into a pile and grabbed another one. In this way, comments, like the autobiographies, were also made public. My written responses to the autobiographies were among those of the students. Two and a half hours of class time spread over two different class days were allotted for reading and responding to the texts. The autobiographies

were placed in binders and put on reserve in the library for those students who were not able to finish reading and responding during class time. Every student was expected to comment on every autobiography.

General guidelines for the responses were:

1)respond to the autobiography as a piece of writing, for example, what moved, impressed or delighted you? This could include a descriptive passage, special details, etc.

2)regarding the stated influences on language and literacy: is there something the writer needs to consider further?

3)consider how this person's experiences may influence his or her teaching. An example from Sarah was: "How do you think your views on gender will impact you and your students in the classroom? Can you see there being any challenges to face?" (Sarah to Linda).

In addition to these comments, I asked the students to think about their classmates as students in their future classrooms, posing the question "how will knowing this student's life history influence your teaching?"

At the end of the tenth week I returned the autobiographies and asked the students to bring to the next class a freewrite response to comments they had received. We discussed those in small groups first before having a large group discussion. When the semester ended, five students (four women and one man) agreed to be interviewed about the experience of doing critical literacy autobiographies.

Data

In this inquiry project, I collected the following data: 11 autobiographies (1800-2400 words each); the responses written on the autobiographies (92 total responses, ranging from 10 to 313 words each); a transcript of one class discussion; the freewrite responses (that six students handed in) to the question: what's your response to the responses you received?; notes from my teaching journal; and transcripts from interviews with five students (30-50 minutes each). In selecting interviewees, stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used in order to capture a range of perspectives. (See appendix B for the interview protocol).

Narrative analysis

Building on Bruner's notion of paradigmatic and narrative ways of knowing (1985), Polkinghorne (1995), distinguishes two ways of using narrative in qualitative research: analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. The purpose of analysis of narratives is to discover "themes that hold across the stories or in taxonomies of types of stories. ... [it] moves from stories to common elements" (p. 12). In their ground-breaking work with women, Belenky et al (1986/1997) utilized this type of analysis to generate five broad categories of epistemological frameworks that they saw emerge from one hundred and thirty-five interviews. In contrast, the purpose of narrative analysis is to create one, cohesive understanding of many stories and elements. It is like a novel in that elements such as plot structure and themes do not have separate chapters--they are interwoven and exist simultaneously. "The desired outcome is not a generalization but a narrative which renders clear the meanings inherent in or generated by a particular subject" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 76). Narrative analysis suited the nature of my study and in this paper, the particular subject is students' responding to classmates' autobiographies.

My objective in this analysis is to bring together the myriad of elements in this autobiography project and tell this story of stories. Narrative analysis does not mean that themes or categories will not emerge, but rather that the elements can not be disentangled without some loss of meaning.

Findings

The autobiographies revealed a range of critical engagement

As the focus of this paper is on the issue of responding to others, I have not included an in-depth analysis of the autobiographies. However, I will provide a brief overview of the texts in order to make the analysis of responses more clear.

As mentioned above, in writing their autobiographies, students were to explore how factors such as race, class, and gender influence(d) their literacy development and how this critical awareness would affect their teaching. In terms of explicitly naming the influence of critical issues in their own development, ten students mentioned gender (two women said it was not an issue);

four students mentioned class; and only two mentioned race. This last fact is not surprising given the surface appearance of our classroom community of twelve white faces. Even though we had read and discussed multiple texts concerning race and class, gender was the difference that could be seen and pointed to; class was blurred by the casual fashion standards of college life—wearing a sweatshirt and baseball cap to class wasn't necessarily a marker.

Given the critical literacy emphasis of the assignment, one of my readings of the autobiographies focused on the ways the writer engaged the issues of race, class, and gender. Using this criterion, level of engagement, four general categories emerged. The following examples illustrate the range as it pertained to the issue of gender:

1)no explicit naming of the issue (race, class, gender). For example, Tom did not mention gender in his autobiography. Amy picked up on the omission and posed a direct question: "Let's hear more about your gender affecting your literacy though. Besides talking about your father and brother—I don't know how else to interpret the gender aspect. Did it just not affect you at all?" (Amy to Tom).

2)naming it but stating it had no effect. Example: "I do not believe that my gender had any influence whatsoever in *how* I came about being literate" (Amy, autobiography, p. 4, emphasis in the original). None of her classmates challenged this assertion.

3)acknowledging that the issue affects literacy but not connecting it to one's personal experience. For example, Billie included a discussion of how the children's poem "What are little boys made of?" perpetuates gender stereotypes:

> A girl should not define herself by the standards in this poem because the female shown is only one type of female. And the same goes for boys; not all boys have to fit this mold…This poem influences gender by dictating what boys and girls should act like and strive for (Billie, auto, pp. 5-6).

Heather wanted to know more about Billie's experiences in addition to her observations: "…did you personally fall victim to the 'little girls' poem or did anyone ever tease you for having a boy's name?" (Heather to Billie).

4)connecting the issue to one's personal literacy development. For example, Heather wrote about the effect of The Baby-sitters' Club series by Ann M. Martin on her adolescent search for identity.

> I can remember wanting to be just like one of the popular characters named Dawn. I convinced myself that I wanted to be a shy quiet girl and impress my parents, teachers, and friends with my "California beauty" and my ability to write poetry… I even went as far as eating tofu because I thought that being a vegetarian was what was expected of a "California girl." …I figured if people liked Dawn, and if I acted like Dawn, then people would have to like me too. …I thought I needed to possess these qualities in order to be accepted by the people in my life (Heather, autobiography, p. 6).

Overall, the autobiographies demonstrated a range in level of engagement with critical pedagogy issues and they also revealed a diversity of experiences that had not been apparent in our classroom discussions.

Writing critical literacy autobiographies is a worthwhile endeavor for prospective teachers

The five students I interviewed all said they enjoyed doing the autobiographies, found them useful, interesting, and challenging. "I loved it. It was great. It made me think" (Patty, interview, p.16). Her response to how writing the autobiography affected her thinking about literacy:

> Shook my world upside down…. I never would have had a concrete vision of the way I started to realize that literacy is more than just books because, if I never wrote the paper, and had you guys write comments and talk about it, be like "Well, didn't this shape you more than this?" This whole semester would have gone by and I would have been like… "Literacy? Reading and writing." But by writing it down and looking at it and having everyone be like 'what about this and this?'…it was kind of like "*Oh*, it does make a difference, it does impact things." I think you have to do it again, if you have this class again, I really would still keep the idea of the critical literacy autobiography (Patty, interview, p.10).

Heather:

> ...this is probably my favorite thing that we've done in the classroom because I got to learn so much, not just about the people in the class but [about] literacy. I became more aware of how I learned and by reading other people's I learned how vastly different we all are in our learning, and in our personal experiences... and how those personal experiences make us who we are (Heather, interview, p.5).

Tom:

> ...by actually writing down our experiences, seems to be much more poignant than if I had simply been told that my past experiences will influence my teaching and that it is important to recognize this. By actually writing down what these experiences, the influence they will have comes more clearly into focus. I now think of my critical literacy autobiography as being one of the most important steps toward my becoming a reflective teacher (Tom, portfolio).

Reading and responding to classmates' autobiographies is not so easy

Even though their comments were overwhelmingly positive, the students identified pieces of the autobiography project that were more challenging and at times disconcerting than others. Specifically, these were the difficulty of responding to someone else's life story and the tension caused by recognizing autobiography as a carefully constructed text. During the semester, when I first read the responses written on the autobiographies, I noticed quite a range in quality and quantity. However, I didn't analyze the responses more closely until the students had identified this area as the most challenging aspect of the project. In this section, I will present an extended discussion on this issue.

Of the seven students who commented (interviews, class discussion) on writing and receiving responses, Mark was the only one who found it unproblematic. On writing them: "Basically, I was always positive, things like 'that was a good point you made about literacy.' (interview, p. 6). On how he interpreted the responses he received: "...basically in a positive way. I looked at them and I said 'Wow! these people understand me a little bit better" (p. 6).

As mentioned above, in class discussion, the freewrite responses, and the interviews, students said they found the task of responding to classmates' autobiographies more challenging than writing their own autobiographies. Therefore, the responses warranted more analysis.

The assignment was for each student to read and respond to all of the autobiographies. Therefore, the total number of responses should have been 110 (eleven students each writing ten responses). However, there were only ninety-two responses. Table 1 details the number of responses each student wrote.

Table 1: Number of students and responses they wrote

Number of students	Number of responses they wrote	Total
7	10	70
1	9	9
1	7	7
2	3	6
total: 11 students		total: 92 responses

In this first stage of analysis, I attended to the function of the statements within the responses. In other words, "what is the writer trying to do here?" Through microanalysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), seven broad categories emerged and are listed below. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of responses that contained each type of remark (92 = 100%). Table 2 provides a break-down of the frequency of the responses in each category.

Table 2: Categories of responses

Category	In x number of responses (% of total)
Affirmation	92 (100%)
Request for expansion	52 (56.5%)
Questions/comments about teaching	44 (49%)
Bonding	18 (19.5%)
Paper as a product	15 (16%)
I learned something from this	5 (5.4%)
Challenging a viewpoint	3 (3.3%)

1) affirmation (92). Anything positive, from short "nice job" to longer phrases and sentences was interpreted as affirmation. The reader may have affirmed the writer as a person, as a technically efficient writer, or as a future teacher. Example: "Wow. I was really impressed with your reflections on your experience with the inner city kids" (Beth to Sarah).

2) a request for expansion (52). This category, also broad in scope, included questions for the writer to consider. These included a range of sincere to detached, formulaic questions, such as "what about music?" Example: "How did your experiences impact the way you raised your kids?" (Sarah to Jane).

3) questions/comments about teaching (44). Here, the readers' comments spoke directly to classmates' as future teachers. Twenty-three of the responses were comments about the person as a future teacher; twenty-one were questions about teaching. Examples: "Reading this paper makes me want to be there in your classroom and observe you as you teach. I think that you will be an exceptional teacher" (Tom to Scott). "Your experiences with church started you out doing competition-based reading; how do you feel about reading for competition as a general start-up for your future students? Will competition leave some kids 'losing' in regards to reading/literacy?" (Patty to Mark).

4) bonding (18). Bonding comments were those where the reader acknowledged a personal connection to the writer and/or the text. Example: "I did the same thing—playing at school. And it wasn't pathetic, just dedicated" (Linda to Amy).

5) paper as a product (15). This category covered comments that attended to form, from mechanics to style. Example: "p. 6: The first sentence doesn't really tie in because you had just been talking about music. Maybe change 'literature' to 'literacy'" (Billie to Heather).

6) I learned something from this (5). These comments reflected a sense of learning by the readers. They gained some valuable insights from the writer's ideas. Example: "It seems that voice and language are a big thing to you. Very cool. You really opened my eyes with your examples" (Heather to Beth). "The Shakespeare reference was also interesting. I never thought about that one" (Amy to Beth).

7) challenging a viewpoint (3). In this category, readers either challenged or disagreed with the writer on something. Example: "One issue I didn't agree with is that from a female athlete's perspective— most of us (I would say 90%) do not mind the term 'Lady___s," we <u>don't</u> find it offensive or degrading <u>at all</u>" (Heather to Billie).

The first three categories, affirmation, request for expansion, and questions/comments about teaching, are not surprising because they match the general guidelines for the assignment. It is also important to note that many of the seven categories o verlap. For example, Tom's comment to Scott is both affirming and a comment on Scott's teaching.

One could argue that the last two categories "I learned something..." and "challenging a viewpoint" do not warrant inclusion because of the infrequency with which they occurred. I include them here because they were noticeably distinct from the other categories and they illustrate other possibilities for ways of responding to students' writing.

A critical reading of the responses revealed a new set of meanings

The categories above attend to the surface level of the texts. However, in analyzing the responses from a critical literacy perspective, which seeks to uncover embedded ideologies and question their social and political implications (Fairclough, 1989; Shor, 1992), and guided by the students' comments that writing the responses was difficult, I identified a different set of categories. These reveal the uneasiness of responding to a life story, especially when that story is not what the reader expected. Discomfort was manifested in comments that distanced the reader from the writer. The categories I identified illustrate how that distance was conveyed or established. Multiple interpretations of these comments are possible, and certainly, different people will read them in different ways. My purpose here is to raise awareness of ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings so that teachers will consider the implications of their responses to students' writing.

The four distancing categories that emerged were:

1) Your world is too different. Readers were sometimes shocked by the disparity between their life and that of the writer. Afraid to offend but not knowing what to say, they relied on ambiguous words like "different" or "interesting" in their comments. Example: "You have lived a very different life than me. Your family background and life experiences are so different they seem foreign to me" (Scott to Jane). What is Jane to make of this statement? Social positions affect interpretation. Here, Scott is a White male from an upper-middle class, suburban family. Jane is a

White female from a working-class, rural family. In her autobiography she shared painful experiences including her first marriage to an abusive alcoholic. She is a returning student who, early in the semester, had voiced feeling out of place among her much younger classmates. Scott's response to her autobiography confirms her feeling.

2) Wow, how come I didn't know this? These statements expressed genuine surprise. Example: "It seems that the church had a huge influence on who you are now. I'm somewhat surprised, that this has never come out before in class" (Scott to Mark). Out of class, Scott asked Mark if he had invented some of the events in his autobiography. Linda's response was similar but she managed to reduce rather than emphasize distance. "I've learned a lot about you that I never expected. Sorry that I underestimated you" (Linda to Mark).

3) I have nothing I want to say to you. This category refers to responses that were noticeably brief. Example: "Good stuff. I like your analogy to the egg shell" (Jane to Tom). These ten words comprised the entirety of Jane's response to Tom's seven-page autobiography. The brevity of her response, even though the content falls in the "affirming" category, conveys insincerity and lack of interest. It creates distance through the message "I have nothing I want to say to you."

4) Good job! What about music? The cumulative effect of formulaic statements and questions such as "good job," or "what about movies?", when not made in reference to a specific piece of the text, conveyed the sense of a detached, uninterested audience. As Heather put it, "With some of them [the responses] I wondered if they [readers] even read it and just read other people's responses because they [said] basically the same thing" (Heather, interview, p. 7).

I do not believe that the students intentionally tried to distance themselves from their classmates but this issue of distancing must be fully explored because it contributes to maintaining hierarchies within the classroom. Students whose stories are outside of their classmates' and teachers' schema quickly learn to censor their life experiences rather than risk their being trivialized, ridiculed, or ignored (see Finders, 1997; and Willis, 1995, for two powerful examples based on class/gender and race). Before exploring the implications of this distancing more fully, I

suggest some explanations for the difficulties students experienced in responding to the autobiographies.

Discussion

One fairly obvious factor in how the readers responded to the autobiographies was the relationship between reader and writer. Classmates who had developed either friendships or a type of academic respect for each other felt more comfortable raising sincere questions. When I asked Heather to talk more about why she did not challenge Scott's "masking" more directly, she said:

> I could say something ... to Sarah or Linda or Mark, people that I'm closer to but Scott with his ideas, [does] not intimidate me, but I don't want to question him because I know the way he will react will be very negative towards me and he won't want to hear that, but that's still what I say, whereas other people that I know I'm going to be talking with would be responsive, be like "OK, let me take a look at that." (Heather, interview, p. 7).

Patty had also reached similar conclusions about Scott:

> You can tell Scott anything and he could care less because he already knows what he wants to know, so it's kind of like he has his own knowledge and he's done with it. He doesn't need to explore that much anymore (Patty, interview, p. 8).

These comments expose the undercurrents of class dynamics and its impact on engagement and dialogue, an area that both critical pedagogy and student-centered pedagogy have been criticized for ignoring (see Ellsworth,1989; and Finders, 1997, respectively). Goffman's work in symbolic interactionism provides a useful insight into the workings of class dynamics.

Disrupting the "working consensus"

By asking students to raise questions on each other's autobiographies I disrupted what Goffman (1959) calls the "working consensus" (p. 10), I was asking students to acknowledge and take up the notion that writers may not be who they say they are—a grave breach of social etiquette. Goffman explains:

> Each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official ruling regarding matters which are vital to him [sic] but not immediately important to others, e.g., the rationalizations and

> justifications by which he accounts for his past activity. In exchange for this courtesy he remains silent or non-committal on matters important to others but not immediately important to him. Together the participants contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. (Goffman, 1959, pp. 9-10).

When we read this passage in light of the autobiography project, which asked students to share their versions of past events (i.e., how they became literate) and then asked them to identify areas that writers should consider further (i.e., not "remain silent"), the tension expressed by Heather in the opening quote is quite clear. Recall that only three of the ninety-two responses contained statements that challenged a viewpoint.

In analyzing transcripts (interviews, class discussion) and written feedback on the issue of responding, I noticed that in the autobiographies, the working consensus was confronted in three different, although often interacting, areas: school scripts; idealized versions of childhood; and the myth of homogeneity. When responding involved confronting any of these areas, writers were uncomfortably challenged.

School scripts

Kris Gutiérrez's work with classroom scripts (1994, 1995) sheds light on the working consensus in school contexts. She defines scripts as normative patterns of classroom interaction that members construct in their classroom contexts (1994). "These scripts are resources that members use for interpreting the activity of others and for guiding their own participation" (p. 340). A classroom becomes "scripted" when these normative patterns come to establish rigid teacher and student roles (p. 341). From this perspective, Scott's "masking" was motivated by his desire to "do" school right. Scott, a student in the university scholars program at our institution, was an accomplished student. Several times during the semester he had expressed self-admiration for his ability to read teachers and fool them with insincere comments. In his autobiography, he

details his life as a privileged White male but then towards the end declares: "When I become an educator, I will change the canon....I will treat my students equally regardless of gender. I will do my best to change the status quo and treat all art, literature, and human experience as equal" (autobiography, p. 7).

Scott is following two scripts: what he thinks his declared feminist instructor wants to hear; and what he knows to be the lesson-learned-from-experience essay, common to composition classes (Newkirk, 1997). I contend that Scott's autobiography was difficult to respond to because, as Heather indicated, it was such a blatant performance piece. His declared mission to "change the canon" conveys insincerity because it contradicted opinions he had stated in class.

Two students expressed feelings that they had been positioned or "scripted" by the assignment to write insincere comments:

Linda:

> I felt I was supposed to go read these [autobiographies] and then say, "OK, this isn't it" Y'know? I felt that maybe I misunderstood what you wanted us to do with this, but I felt that I was forced to go through and say "yeah this is great, but where's this?" because that's what you had been writing on our drafts. "So could you include this, this, and this?" but in reality maybe it was reasonable to add absolutely nothing. I know I probably wrote on half of the papers "What about music?" because it was so important to me but it probably meant nothing to you guys (Linda, class discussion, p.1).

Amy expressed similar feelings:

> ...I thought we were too pressured. I felt I had to say something just for the sake of saying something because I knew that you were going to be checking our responses to see if we had done them. So if I really liked someone's autobiography, sometimes all I really wanted to say was "Great autobiography. This is really good stuff. It really illustrates how you became literate" and instead I felt I had to comment on every little thing because I knew that I was getting--not getting graded for it, but I knew that you were checking up on it. There were some papers that I was really curious about and I did ask questions but there

> were other papers where I just found myself sitting in [the library] saying, "OK, why do you feel this way?" and making stupid comments just because I felt like I had to (Amy, interview p. 5).

This type of script speaks to the issue of teacher expectation and how students "do" school. A factor complicating the internal "how do I respond to this story" quandary was "how do I respond to this story in a way that will get me a good grade?" Amy and Linda were filtering their responses to classmates' stories through the "doing school" lens. However, the struggle that Amy mentions in how to respond beyond "great autobiography" is a worthwhile one. She should be concerned with the implications of her comments—but the implications for the writer, not for the instructor. As Heather's comments regarding the distancing category explain, if writers do not know why a story receives praise, they may read "good job" as insincere. Ironically, Heather and Patty, in their interviews, specifically mentioned Amy's questions as being helpful in contrast to comments they recognized as formulaic or just "fillers" (Patty, interview, p. 6).

Comments by Amy and Billie reveal a frustration with the disruption of the working consensus. Like Scott, they are working within the autobiography-as-school-product script:

Amy (regarding the responses she received):

> It's like in this fiction writing class I have. When I decide to write a short story, I have in mind what I want to write and then when I get them back,... when my peers would critique me they would say "Well, why don't you have more character description?" And I would think to myself "Well, I felt that what I put was enough." I wanted it to look a certain way and so when I get comments like that, it's kind of like, "Well, you want your story to look a certain way and I want mine to look a certain way, so don't ask me why I didn't put every little detail in" (Amy, interview, p. 5).

Billie:

> I think that the questions are very important because they help you flesh out the paper and help it to be better in the end. But it was frustrating to get them at the end, when the

> paper's already done and you think "Oh, yeah. I should have put that in there but I didn't" (class discussion).

I underestimated the power of school scripts in this project. Even though we had had numerous class discussions on the details of the assignment and students had received written instructions with rationale, for some students, their school scripts held sway. It is an issue I will attend to more explicitly in the future. Although issues of power and scripts are always present in the classroom, by explicitly acknowledging and addressing these issues, teachers and students can create "a third space" (Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson, 1995), a place that offers the potential "to rewrite and contest extant texts and discursive practices" (p. 467). First, however, we have to acknowledge that the scripts exist.

Idealized versions of childhood

While Heather identified a type of masking in Scott's autobiography, Patty suspects Heather is also masking something. In her interview, Patty identified another type of masking in the autobiographies: idealized versions of childhood: "...all those girls wearing dresses and bows and you're just like 'What?'.... [A]s sweet and idyllic as some of those families looked, they're not always that way" (interview, p. 14). The following comments offer further insights into why Heather chose not to challenge Scott. Like, Heather, what Patty was thinking and how she responded were very different:

> When I read Heather's paper, I was like "You've got to be kidding." She was in the most idyllic world I've ever seen, like sprinkling little angels [in a high voice] "Ahhhhh, read books, and go to the beach and be blonde." ....[It was hard to write comments] especially on people's papers that were like Heather's. Like, "it's just perfect! And I'm so glad that everything is so sugar sweet." But Heather does know that not everyone's life is like hers and it didn't take these papers to tell her, so I felt bad saying stuff like "nice to hear that your life is so sugar-coated, how do you feel about students who don't have a life anything like yours?" Cause it's not like that, you know? she is empathetic and she is understanding and you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings either.

Compare this to what Patty actually wrote on Heather's autobiography:

> 2nd ¶ = yea 480! [another class]
>
> pg. 7: • book…why do we obsess, I wonder? Good self-reflection. (smiley face)
>
> • never get a man…how often have I heard this from women on my floor. Like that should be the ultimate goal of life…argh. It is good that you recognize the stereotype.
>
> Great conclusion! I have no doubt that your students will come away from your class excited about literacy—you make it a fever that is easy to catch (poor metaphor, sorry!). Nice job! (drawing of lips) Smooch! (heart) Patty (smiley face).

Notice that even though Patty said "I felt bad saying stuff like 'nice to hear…'", she did not write any such comment on Heather's paper. Her comments serve the functions of bonding and affirmation; she does not challenge Heather nor does she make a request for expansion. The struggle that Patty experiences, like Amy's above, is a healthy one, and taps into the challenge for critical feminist pedagogy: welcoming life stories while advocating self-critique. Patty, however, felt that her own autobiography, a stark contrast to the majority of her classmates', provided a more powerful impetus for reflection than any questions she could have written on her classmates' papers.

Several students had mentioned that the autobiographies of Sarah and Heather represented the ideal childhood. I asked Heather about her classmates' interpretations of her autobiography: Heather:

> I could have gone into some of the more painful aspects of my life but I just decided to stay away from it. I don't think that I was ready to share that kind of stuff. Patty is very open about what has happened to her and her past and, -- not that mine is even close to that but there are things that I just wanted to keep more personal. I don't know that I was ready to share that then (interview, p. 10).

Feminist pedagogy works to create safe places for members to take risks, but it also recognizes that individuals perceive that space and safety differently. Patty told her classmates that she would not

have been so open about her past (see next section) if she had not been ready to do it and if we as a community had not created a safe space. Heather's comments, echoed by Sarah, are reminders that "a safe space" is not a universal entity. Each class member negotiates and mediates participation. Nor is it necessary for anyone to share extremely painful moments. Heather's honesty about her adolescent gendered literacy practices made her as vulnerable as Patty but in a very different realm. Perhaps Heather felt strong enough about who she was as a woman to share that history and its contradictions (past and present), but was not ready to make public other personal inquiries.

The myth of homogeneity

The flip side of the idealized childhood may be an in-your-face reality, one that disrupts the working consensus for a group of individuals who have assumed that they were basically all the same. Whereas school scripts and idealized childhood are examples of the writers' attempts to maintain the working consensus, in this third category, the writers seek to disrupt that consensus with their stories.

Two of the autobiographies presented a distinct contrast to the other nine, which depicted happy families thriving in safe, secure middle-class neighborhoods. Indeed, Patty suggested that she was motivated to share the struggles of her home life in order to "jolt" her classmates into recognizing that not all students come from perfect homes. She and Jane shared stories of alcoholism and family break-ups. Their classmates expressed surprise and awkwardness about how to respond:

Amy (to Patty):

> Yours blew me away. I didn't know any of that stuff about you and what am I supposed to do? [write] 'Well, why not, Patty?' (the class laughs). Yours and Jane's were probably the most profoundly--, I found out a lot of stuff I never knew and I mean, everyone's is personal but... I never knew you had so much going on in your past (class discussion).

Heather:

> When I was reading Jane's I was constantly comparing it to my past and I was like "who am I to say a word?" I've lived in Beaver Cleaver land for twenty-one years and who am I to say-- it's not that I didn't want to give feedback on that. I can't even relate to it (class discussion).

These comments -- "your world is foreign to me" (Scott); "I can't even relate to it" (Heather); "I didn't know any of that stuff...and what am I supposed to do?" (Amy); --indicate surprise and a lack of knowing how to respond that speaks to the complexity of sharing stories in the classroom. They also serve to distance the reader from the writer.

While Jane and Patty wrote of some hard times in their lives, it is important to note that they were neither victim stories nor melodramatic triumph over adversity stories. As Patty said, "Linda...was pretty much the same as Amy: 'You share so much pain.' But I don't look at it as pain" (interview, p. 12).

All of the students had professed interest in student-centered pedagogy. They often talked of the need for school to be more relevant to students' lives and interests. I believe they were sincere, but their responses to Jane's and Patty's autobiographies reveal that they had underestimated what students might share when given the opportunity.

Amy's autobiography did not challenge the myth of homogeneity. On the contrary, it helped to forge a false homogeneity of a hetero-Christian norm. Three of her classmates explicitly talked about the role of their Christian faith in their literacy development (e.g., parents using the Bible to teach their children to read). Amy, the only Jewish student in the class, made no mention of her Jewish culture in her autobiography. Two weeks after the autobiography project, she gave a literature presentation in class on a Holocaust memoir. As part of her presentation she told us a story of a frightening experience she had had a year earlier in her introductory field experiences teaching practicum. After weeks and weeks of observations and serving as a classroom aide, Amy was going to get her first chance to lead a lesson. The topic was open. Amy prepared a lesson on the Holocaust.

Amy: I worked really hard on it. I was really looking forward to doing it. But then, the day before I was supposed to teach, I was sitting in the back of the classroom and I saw this group of boys drawing swastikas in their notebooks and on desks. I got scared. I thought to myself 'I can't do this' [lesson on the Holocaust]. And I just made up some stupid little lesson [class discussion].

After class, I rushed home and re-read Amy's autobiography. She had not mentioned anything about her Jewish heritage, yet her presentation revealed how important it was to her. Why was this piece missing? Given the strong opinions regarding feedback from classmates, I asked Amy (during our interview) if not including her Jewish heritage was an example of one of the pieces she had consciously decided not to include. She replied, "To tell you the truth, I didn't even think about my faith and how it play a part "(interview, p.7). Then, Amy went on to describe her experiences attending a private Jewish school, in which half of each day was spent in Hebrew class. In other words, she had attended a bilingual school.

Amy:

> I was learning to read and write in an entirely different language, you know, different letters and things like that. So, that was another aspect…[M]aybe I could have included my Hebrew literacy in there…*I didn't even think about it until now* (interview, p.7, emphasis added).

Amy then went on to describe her experiences helping her mother, who had converted to Judaism when Amy was a teenager, with her homework, specifically teaching her how to read and write Hebrew. Amy's text contributes to the myth of a monolingual, Christian homogeneity.

It's important to note that Amy did share these pieces of her life with the class, but still I wonder why they were not in her text. Had the permanence of the autobiography as written text unknowingly affected its content? bell hooks (1989) struggled over the same question: "To talk about one's life—that I could do. To write about it, to leave a trace—that was frightening" (p.156). Amy's autobiography raises serious questions for me as a critical feminist teacher. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this here, but the question I must challenge myself to

answer is "what does Amy's experience say about the kinds of pedagogical spaces I helped create or foreclose?"

Implications

As Finders (1997) and Willis (1995) have aptly illustrated, students learn what is acceptable to share in the classroom through the responses they receive from readers (classmates and teachers). One of the girls in Finders' study censors her political interests after being jeered by classmates for the feminist essay she wrote in the sixth grade. Willis shares a story involving her eight-year-old son who has already learned which pieces of his world are not worth sharing with his classmates. As one of the only African American children in a class dominated by European Americans, the boy stops writing about events specific to the African American experience because his classmates' laughter and teacher's questions convey the feelings "your world is foreign to me"; "I can't even relate to it."

Returning to the distancing categories mentioned earlier in this paper, I contend that they work to censor students' writing and convey, not so subtly, which types of stories are welcomed in the classroom. Furthermore, they help maintain the working consensus, i.e., mainstream, i.e., White, middle-class world view. Such stories, even though the readers might realize they are idealized, do not receive the "your-world-is-too-strange" responses. Goffman suggests that if the working consensus is not disrupted, individuals may come to believe they are the constructed representations that they present to others. From this perspective, we begin to see how not challenging these representations, even though the motivation may be rooted in social etiquette, serves to legitimate certain stories and experiences over others. If we are to understand how teachers can make pedagogical spaces that welcome difference, we must take into consideration how teachers censor their own lives, how they deny their own difference in order to fit into a mythic homogeneity. In the rural hills of south central Pennsylvania, where the Klu Klux Klan is still a visible presence, Amy feared that revealing her Jewish identity would cause her harm. When she returns to the affluent White suburb of Philadelphia she calls home, she could use her experience to create more welcoming spaces for students from backgrounds different from hers. If

she can connect how her fear informed the decisions she made regarding content, she may have a new appreciation for how the context she helps to create influences what her students feel is safe to share with her and classmates.

I believe this teacher inquiry project also has implications for the use of autobiography in developing reflective practice in prospective teachers. On this point I agree with Cortazzi (1993) "If we are to use narrative in a reflective approach to teacher development, we need to reflect on the nature of narrative" (p.22). What is needed is critical feminist inquiry of autobiography that will allow us to understand how writing and sharing autobiographies in teacher education courses can reinscribe or challenge dominant ideologies.

Conclusion

Though the students in my secondary language arts methods class struggled with responding to the autobiographies, our class discussions helped us process the struggle collectively. The honesty (and some humor) that pervaded the discussion allowed us to engage this issue thoughtfully and responsibly. In addition, we learned that responding comes in many forms, not only as comments on a paper, but also in listening, in asking each other questions, and acknowledging and valuing stories that shake up the working consensus.

Recognizing that school is scripted is not a new insight, and admittedly, when I was envisioning the autobiography project, I underestimated the power of the script(s). However, the students' honesty in discussing the project led me to a richer understanding of the complexity of sharing stories in the classroom. I take away from the experience a stronger conviction that our stories do need to be interrogated, and our ways of responding to each other also require critical analysis. In future classes, I will give this issue the attention it deserves, including self-critiques of our responses to each other.

Even though it may be difficult to respond to stories that disrupt the working consensus, I hope prospective teachers will see that it is not impossible. Last week I ran into Beth, who is currently doing her student teaching in a nearby middle school. I mentioned that I was writing this paper on the autobiographies, in particular, looking at the responses people wrote to each other.

She said, "You know, I'm doing that right now with my seventh graders. It's really hard for them to know what to write besides 'good job.' We're working on it though."

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Appendix A: Sequence of writing assignments related to the autobiography project.

Week 3 (of 15)

Students bring to class drafts of response paper: the role of gender in language and literacy development. Peer review workshop.

Week 4

Students bring to class two copies of revised response papers. At least three classmates read each paper and provide written feedback. One copy is submitted to the instructor.

Week 5

Students bring to class drafts of response paper: the role of community (includes race and class) in language and literacy development. Peer review workshop. Instructor returns gender response papers.

Week 6

Students bring to class two copies of revised response papers. At least three classmates read each paper and provide written feedback. One copy is submitted to the instructor.

Week 7

Students bring to class drafts on critical literacy autobiographies. Peer review workshop. Instructor returns community response papers.

Week 8

Students bring to class two copies of revised critical literacy autobiographies. Each student is to read every autobiography and provide written feedback.

Spring break

Week 9

Students finish reading and responding to autobiographies.

Week 10

Students receive their autobiographies with comments of classmates and the instructor. For the following class, they complete a freewrite response to the question: what is your response to the comments you received? Small and large group discussion on the responses.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

At least two days before the scheduled interview, I gave each interviewee the following written guidelines:

Before we talk, please do the following:

Read your autobiography and the comments you received.

Think about which of your classmates' autobiographies stood out for you and why.

Think about your beliefs regarding literacy and learning/teaching.

The first question will be: Tell me how you came to be in the secondary English Education program.

Questions about the autobiographies (yours and your classmates) will follow.

During the interviews, I asked the following questions of each participant*:

Tell me how you came to be in the secondary English Education program.

(why a teaching? why English? why secondary education?)

Tell me about your beliefs regarding literacy.

Tell me about your beliefs regarding learning.

I asked you to write a critical literacy autobiography. How did you interpret the assignment?

How did the writing of the autobiography affect your thinking about literacy?

Tell me about your experience reading and responding to classmates' autobiographies.

How did that experience (reading classmates' autobiographies) affect your understanding of literacy?

How did you interpret the responses you received?

Is there anything you want to add about the autobiography experience in our class?

*Although every interview covered these questions, I also asked follow-up and probing questions that were unique to each interview.